Reading, Writing and Literacy: Building Essential Knowledge

Alfabetização e letramento: construindo saberes essenciais

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to identify the obstacles throughout Brazil's history that have inhibited access to public schools for poor children as well as the importance of school as a socio-cultural agency. In order to follow a path of theoretical investigation on the institution known as "school," this article will be based on the work of Ferreiro, Silva and Branco, among others. The results of this research show that in the school context, there are real possibilities that permit the achievement of previously-defined goals on instruction and learning and more specifically, for the effectuation of language construction and appropriation (the act of writing and reading) in an environment in which classes are able to be structured so as to be the starting point of building meaningful knowledge.

Index terms: literacy and *letramento*, public school, teaching and learning, methods, public policy.

RESUMO

Este trabalho tem como objetivo verificar os entraves que inviabilizaram, ao longo da história educacional brasileira, o acesso de crianças pertencentes às classes populares na rede pública de ensino, e verificar, também, a importância da escola como instância sócio-cultural. Procura percorrer uma trilha de investigação teórica sobre essa agência denominada escola e, para isso, fundamenta-se nos pressupostos de Ferreiro, Silva e Branco, dentre outros autores. Os resultados desta pesquisa apontam que, no contexto escolar, instalam-se possibilidades reais de consecução das metas previstas para o processo de ensino e aprendizagem; e - mais especificamente -, para a efetivação construção e apropriação da língua, ato

de ler e escrever, em um ambiente em que as salas de aulas podem se configurar, dependendo dos que nela atuam, em pontos de partida para a construção de conhecimentos significativos.

Palavras-chave: Alfabetização e letramento, escola pública, ensino e aprendizagem, métodos, políticas públicas.

1. Introduction

The goals of this article are to identify the barriers that have, throughout Brazilian educational history, made it impossible for the children of lower social classes to access public education and to also verify the importance of school as a socio-cultural agency.

To achieve these objectives, this research focuses on a theoretical investigation based on Ferreiro's assumptions, among others, for whom "those who fail in school are no different from those who are successful" (1991); Silva (1998), who reflects on the history of literacy in Brazil; and Branco (1997), who discusses teachers' daily work in school.

2. History and School in the Early Years of the Republic of Brazil

According to Silva (1998), in the Republic of Brazil (after Brazil gained independence from its colonizer, Portugal), the country was preparing to implement capitalism; immigrant labor would replace that of slaves once the abolition of slavery assumed responsibility for preparing a society of free men.

In this context, urban society called for education, but as a tool of power and prestige, completely dissociated from the social and economic needs of the time, since middle class expansion would increase the demand

for education as a means of social ascension, just as industrial expansion would demand professional development of skilled labor.

With the revolution of 1930, a movement organized by the urban middle class arose that sought education as a way of filling existing, vacant bureaucratic posts.

The school, as we conceive of it, is a recent institution, especially when referring to public school, destined for lower class society. We know that since 1960, when public education assumed as part of its duties the instruction of literacy, the working conditions of teachers and other educators have prevented quantity from aligning with quality.

This is because access to reading and writing, for all of the population, was constantly on the agenda of government plans and was the focus of many authoritarian and democratic political parties. However, merely talk in support of public primary education was often enough to achieve these parties' political objectives, since what had always lacked in these discourses and campaigns was the basic ingredient that moves and makes real any speech, dream or ideology: "will" transformed into real and effective actions that, beyond being utopian, materialize with seriousness and constancy in their execution.

At the end of World War II, this situation intensified and culminated in the military coup of 1964, in which educational reorganization was entrusted to international organizations with the objective of democratizing instruction and, consequently, democratizing access to public school for all citizens. For the first time in Brazil, this possibility seemed viable.

To achieve this, the private sector was called upon to participate. The social conception of colonial Brazil re-emerged: manual, unskilled labor and access to public education was offered to the lower classes; the upper classes were offered private schools, skilled labor and professional intellectual development.

The year 1964 marked an important moment because the country's political organization was changed by the military dictatorship: the economic model consolidated in Brazil was one of international capital and an external focus; the changes reached the Brazilian educational system; the education model chosen to be implemented throughout Brazil was developed in the United States for developing countries.

The demands of the Brazilian middle class for expanded enrollment at universities were addressed by a reorganization of the Brazilian educational system that increased the number of technical courses because with the newfound presence of multinational companies in Brazil, the demand for skilled labor grew. This change happened because "productive forces and the relations of production characteristic of capitalism only solidify and expand in a universe of values, ideas, notions and appropriate doctrines" (IANNI, 1976).

The LDBEN[1] No. 5692/71, which set guidelines and foundations for teaching primary and secondary education, was sanctioned by then President Emilio G. Medici, the Minister of Education Jarbas Passarinho, and Ministry Secretary General Julio Barata on August 11, 1971, to legally support Brazilian education reform.

Now that primary education was compulsory, the state assumed the responsibility for public education directed at Brazil's popular classes. With this measure, access to public school expanded for the first time and consequently:

> [...] The expansion of enrollment caused changes in the traditional school environment: larger classrooms, passing periods, recruitment of new teachers; many students transferring in from low-performing schools; chaos in adopting changes to curriculum and the criteria for passing grade levels; in other words, a set of factors that hindered understanding of
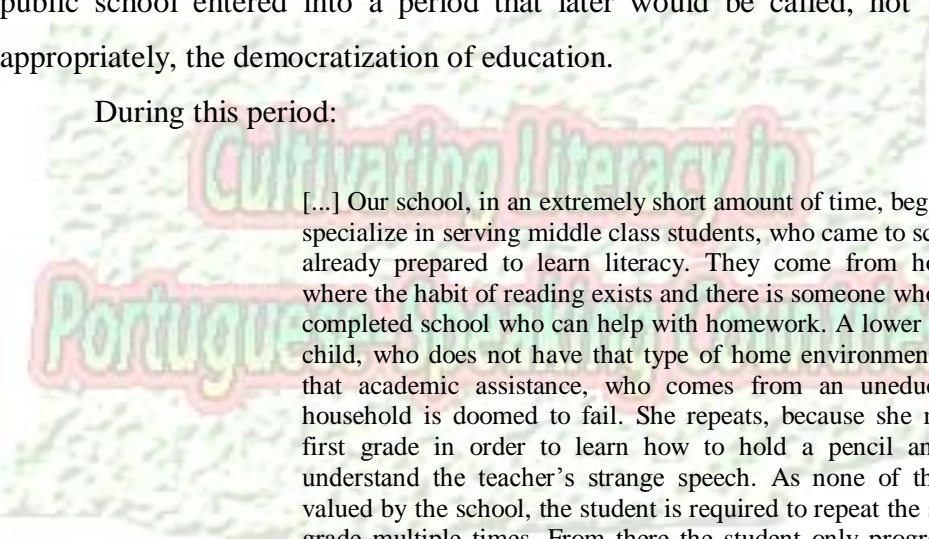
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[1] LDBEN is an acronym that stands for *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*, or Law on Guidelines and Foundations for National Education.

what was happening that was most relevant to schools. (WHITE, 1997, p. 28)

The reorganization of education in Brazil - conceptualized in the U.S., deployed and staffed by Americans technical experts - was not an educational model for Americans, but for Brazilians, because at no point was education emphasized as a priority but was instead viewed as a necessity restricted to labor.

The implemented economic model was a capitalist one for peripheral countries, in which unregulated competitiveness, individualism and consumption are prioritized at the expense of social policies. The Brazilian public school entered into a period that later would be called, not very appropriately, the democratization of education.

During this period:

> [...] Our school, in an extremely short amount of time, began to specialize in serving middle class students, who came to school already prepared to learn literacy. They come from homes where the habit of reading exists and there is someone who has completed school who can help with homework. A lower class child, who does not have that type of home environment nor that academic assistance, who comes from an uneducated household is doomed to fail. She repeats, because she must, first grade in order to learn how to hold a pencil and to understand the teacher's strange speech. As none of this is valued by the school, the student is required to repeat the same grade multiple times. From there the student only progresses from failure to failure. (RIBEIRO, 1995, p. 123)

Contrary to plan, once this education reform had been implemented, missteps began to happen. Although the administrative-bureaucratic system assumed responsibility for safeguarding the educational process, the *curricula* proposed for teachers' professional development courses were never carried out but instead obstructed the process that had been planned. Since the teachers were completely unfamiliar with the new "clientele" (lower class students) in their classrooms, the supposedly new democratic

public school system was actually centered around the idealized middle class student and according to Branco:

> [...] through their complaints, teachers illustrate the difficulties they face at work on a daily basis. They report that they send notes to parents informing them of their children's missing assignments, requesting their attendance at parent-teaching meetings to talk about improving their children's academic performance and they receive no responses. They share that parents do not attend meetings and conclude that parents are not interested in their children's schooling. This might be true if all parents were literate so that they could read the notes sent home and respond to them, if the meetings did not conflict with the work schedules of parents who, in times of unemployment, cannot afford to compromise their job security by taking time off of work for school meetings. (BRANCO, 1997, p. 56)

3. The 1990s: New Winds

On December 20, 1996, the Law on Guidelines and Foundations for National Education (LDBEN) No. 9394/96 was promulgated; it deals with the organization of the education system and a common curricular base for Brazil, under the guidance of National Curricular Parameters (PCNs).

LDBEN enables a reorganization of the state education network through deliberation of the State Board of Education (CEE) No. 9/97, which refers to the first eight years of primary education, including a didactic structure organized into two segments: Cycle I (the first four years of primary education) and Cycle II (the final four years of primary school).

In these cycles, school-based education is based on continuous progression. To better understand education in cycles, it is necessary to be familiar with the development theory of Piaget and other collaborators. For this author:

> [...] [H]uman action consists of continuous and perpetual motion of *equilibrium*. That is why, in realignment or beginning *equilibrium* phases, one can consider the successive mental structures that produce development with forms of *equilibrium*, where each one represents progress over the preceding forms. But you also need to understand that this

> functional mechanism, for as general as it is, does not explain content or the structure of various needs, because each one of them is relative to organization at the given level. (PIAGET, 1989, p. 78)

Thus at any moment, a child's interests depend on the set of her affective aptitudes, since they tend to complete the interests in hopes of reaching greater *equilibrium*.

Therefore, through cycles and the continuous progression system, it is possible to develop pedagogical action founded on learning, in order to move the focus from the teaching process to learning; in other words, the goal now is to build the learning process and no longer merely identify individual learning difficulties.

Since 1998, the Department of Education of the State of São paulo has been developing a new organization of instruction aimed at the learning process of the majority of students, since learning problems generated in previous periods still persist in the school context, since:

> [...] Access to knowledge is a social benefit that is a right of all children and is the reason for the very existence of the school. When schools simply classify and separate those considered more capable of succeeding in future grades, they end up penalizing precisely those who need school the most, the students belonging to disadvantaged social classes and who are farther removed from school culture. (FDE, 1998)

The route identified for the education of lower class students in public schools has been permeated to a large extent by failure, except for isolated experiences, which are islands of excellence. The results need to be analyzed to reverse this situation, since the globalized world demands citizens who not only know the alphabet but who are also literate.

With this backdrop of space-time in which education occurs, we intend to make some remarks related to the teaching of literacy that takes place in the current context, after Piaget's genetic psychology contributions: the nearly twenty years since the publication of Ferreiro and Teberosky's

ideas on the psychogenesis of learning to read and write. In the 1980s, these authors affirm that the process of teaching and learning is studied from the perspective of the cognizant subject. Contributions from the fields of sociology, psycholinguistics, and psychology have in a rich and solid way improved our views about the process of teaching and learning native languages, centered now on how the child learns.

Added to this context in particular are our investigations as literacy teachers and teacher "trainers," since in our work we use contributions relating to literacy,[2] a term that came out of social psychology and that gradually is being incorporated into the concept of literacy.

It is thus that we move forward with the intention of understanding and investigating knowledge concerning literacy and how to "do" literacy: an always arduous task when the starting point is not to close the matter but instead to revisit the inconvenient questions inherent in this process.

4. Literacy in the State of São Paulo

In reviewing the traditional ways in which literacy instruction and learning happens in the school context, we realized that before the 1980s, the central issue was the level of belief that educators had in the effectiveness of analytical and synthetic methods. In Ferreiro's theories, we found verification of this valuation of method in the imaginary of the teacher. For this author:

> [...] the concerns of educators have turned to focus on finding the "best" or most effective of them [methods], creating thus a controversy involving two basic types: synthetic methods that focus on elements smaller than the word, and analytical

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[2] The original Portuguese term used here is "letramento," which is distinct from "alfabetização." Unfortunately, both translate to "literacy" in English, though one could argue that "alfabetização" is more properly "basic or early literacy" and "letramento" is "literacy" in the broader and more advanced sense. Out of respect for this imperfect translation, the original word "letramento" will be used throughout this text wherever it occurs in the original document.

methods that focus on words and larger units of language. (FERREIRO, 1991, p. 18)

For these methods, it is interesting to note that they are based on the assumption that each sound corresponds with a letter and that this was the teacher's main task: teach each student which letter represented which sound and vice versa.

In order to master this process, the teacher's lessons relied almost exclusively on the *cartilha.*[3] In this kind of traditional approach, the theoretical assumption guiding it is passive learning.

In the late 1970s, the Department of Education of the State of São Paulo (SEE/SP) conducted research to identify and quantify the extent of the problems of grade retention and dropout. The results showed that over 40% of children had to repeat first grade. This situation was more severe in areas with a higher concentration of low-income families, the urban periphery, where 70% of students had been held back.

The Department of Education of the State of São Paulo, after an extensive period in which educators found themselves alienated from the educational debate and deliberation, due to excessive centralization in our current public policies and to the authoritarianism embedded in those policies, a long process of discussion was restarted that, one can say, still remains in the education system of São Paulo today.

In 1983, the opinion of the State Board of Education, CEE No. 1913/83, published in the Official Gazette of 31/12/83, approved Basic Cycle (CB) implementation in state schools. At the beginning of the 1984 school year, the basic cycle was implemented, and to achieve the desired results, some measures were translated by: decrees, opinions, resolutions and communications, among others. Finally, the state education network mobilized to stop the mass retention of students from lower classes, since,

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[3] *Cartilha,* or workbook, is a type of book that contains the presentation of the letters of the alphabet in order to teach reading and writing. There are many types of *cartilhas.*

according to the Department of Education, "although the Federal Constitution guarantees the right to a free education from ages seven to fourteen, the problem remains the inability to guarantee, in fact, education because of the impossibility of continuous enrollment and an effective school-based learning approach" (ATPCE/CENP, 1987).

The SEE/SP, by choosing the modality of learning by cycle, was using Piaget's work on human development as its foundation, as well as Ferreiro and Teberosky's research on the construction of writing, whose results were socialized in the 1980s. As a first goal in overcoming the learning difficulties associated with lower income students, SEE sought out education theory that was more fitting to the reality of public school:

> Now we begin to understand that those who fail in school are no different from those who succeed. For all of them, the development of reading and writing skills is a building process. Available information, including information systematically provided by the school, is only one intervening factor. If children test out, with so much effort, several hypotheses alien to our way of thinking, there is some reason why this is so. (FERREIRO, 1991, p. 60)

Anchored in theoretical support, the Department of Education took care so that other actions consubstantiated the implementation of Basic Cycle projects, as its specific objectives are: to inform all education professionals about CB and share knowledge; educate educational professionals so that they commit to the objectives of the project, i.e., stop making students repeat grades; develop specific material; guarantee a maximum number of students per class (thirty-five); provide to teachers included in the project pedagogical support; extend the school day by two hours per day, for students and teachers; ensure the development of different methodologies; and include a meal for the children, as they would now spend six hours per day at school.

The discussions initiated in the 1980s and the proposed reorganization of the system through Basic Cycle and *Jornada Unica*,[4] established by Decree No. 21833 of 28/12/83, were characterized by continuously integrating the process of teaching and learning corresponding to the first two grades of primary school. These discussions led to the gradual reorganization of schools in order to adequately treat the necessities of student learning during the first two years of school.

Now the goal was to advance educators' conceptions and beliefs so that they become conscientious of the fact that teaching students their native language was much more than a question of method. For this, the Coordination of Pedagogical Studies and Standards (CENP) produced instructional materials especially for the area of literacy. These materials expressed and stored until now the traces, ideas and political actions of another era, leaving us to understand their intentions concerning the acquisition of reading and writing.

After this period of reflection – the result of the knowledge brought by researchers Ferreiro and Teberosky, who are guided by the contributions of Piaget's genetic psychology – we begin to focus our actions and our conception of knowledge and literacy from the perspective of the subject apprentice; the way he organizes learning and his prior knowledge about language begin to be investigated and considered by educators.

The Piagetian concepts indicate that the knowing subject seeks to learn and understand, through his own channels, by interacting with the world. Therefore, teachers' representation of learning and intervention are not always consistent with learners' internal time, which ends up justifying the consolidation and maintenance of schoolwork by series and not by cycle. It is clear, therefore, that there is a mismatch between what is

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[4] *Jornada Unica*: A six-hour school day

theorized and what is later formalized in practice, as was the case of the Basic Cycle Proposal.

We understand the complexity of intervening in teachers' beliefs about the pedagogical duties of educators; prescribing a *curriculum*, making a proposal or even establishing educational guidelines is more profound and complex than one may think. This is the great challenge of academia, of those who think about education: creating balance and harmony between the theory, teaching practice and multifaceted quotidian reality of the universe of the school and its protagonists.

We live by our history of political discontinuity in constant transition on the path to learning our mother tongue and as Freire points out, "[T]ransition then becomes a time of options. Feeding on changes, transition is more than change. It really implies the march that makes society search for new themes, new tasks or, more preciously, its objectification" (1989, p. 65).

Increasingly, as historical subjects, we confirm that knowledge is not and cannot be an isolated act. Knowledge is part of a process that is fundamentally characterized by its personhood and constant interaction.

5. Literacy and "Letramento"

Regarding literacy learning (learning how to read and write), we have observed that the traditional methods of literacy continue to affirmatively insist on wanting to teach this ability, empirically, through verbalization, visual and motor training, and reiterated and repeated demonstration of the relationship between alphabetical writing and the sonorous aspects of speech. These traditional methods assume that this relationship can be taught through mechanical and de-contextualized education focusing on the link between letters and phonemes, as if this relationship can be learned passively, and not as the result of real construction interacting with written language.

This concept only reaffirms the limitations of the term "literacy" as it has been understood and practiced even today in schools: mastery of reading and writing. At this point, we emphasize the importance of *letramento* studies - an expression coined in 1996 by Kato, according to Soares (1998) and that has been used in education and linguistic sciences since the second half of the eighties. In Brazil, research on *letramento* has been developed mainly by Angela Kleiman and Magda Soares, in order to explain the social effect of writing in literacy studies.

To define the term *Letramento*, we turn to Magda Soares' work "*Letramento*: a theme in three genres," in which, starting with other authors' studies, Soares tries to point out the term in the field of Education and Linguistic Sciences.

In this sense, inside *Letramento*, writing is seen as a process of real democratization of culture, not just as an object of school activity. *Letramento* brings out the social nature of writing: it extrapolates the limiting character of literacy by embracing and legitimizing strategies and

experiences built and developed by the subject in his everyday life for situations involving the use of reading and writing.

We understand *letramento* as a real possibility in which the human being experiences the social function of the use of reading and writing. We reaffirm thus the ancestral character of learning and living in groups particular to one's species, since, according to Colello, "[C]ontrary to animals, whose physiological bases determine their possibilities and limits, man can count upon non-corporeal equipment – reason – which offers a multitude of opportunities in expressing himself" (1995, p. 11).

We also found from the same author that

> [...] [T]aking advantage of the tradition, conventions and achievements of its ancestors, culture is constructed from exchanges between men. It would be impossible if the individual locked up inside himself his life story. (COLELLO, 1995, p. 12)

For decades, studies and teaching practices ignored the previous knowledge and the social uses that learners made of language, as well as their practices before they began school.

Since these school practices were full of improprieties from the point of view of the cultured norm, the incoherencies sometimes presented by the students when learning literacy were not seen as evidence of an ongoing process of the acquisition of the written representation of language, registered and acquired by the students by observing adults and users of language. These moments reveal and make clear the child's manipulation of her own language: the history of acquiring writing skills that the child (re)constructs when beginning to read and write.

This cognitive potential of the "learning subject" was proficiently exploited by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1999) in light of Piaget's genetic psychology.

As educators and teachers in preschool and elementary school, we propose teaching situations that allow students to advance their understanding in relation to literacy only as mastery of a code, a process of fundamental importance in the acquisition of reading and writing. However, this process is complemented by *letramento*, as a process of valuing and experiencing the social use of different discursive genres. We understand that this access will trigger mastery of the linguistic variety that we want them (students) to learn, thus building proficient readers.

To teach literacy and *letramento*, starting from the demand that society needs, is the great challenge of education in our century. It is a challenge for countries like Brazil, where we cross the threshold of educational chaos with a great number of illiterates, including, in this context, children, youth and adults.

Many of these illiterates are people who, at the time of their initial and regular school attendance, experienced situations of social and economic exclusion and/or a history of literacy marked by failing classes and repeating grades and we know that their reading and writing acquisition was marked by a mechanistic method in which teaching reading and writing did not occur in the context of social practices, since teaching the technology of reading and writing was more highly valued, with uncharacterized texts that only served in the school instance for decoding, memorizing, and lessons on grammar rules to the detriment of the student's development.

We believe that by working the acquisition of reading and writing with the goal of helping students become literate through active practice, writing fulfills its social function, in a transformative direction that points out paths, that alerts, that is not restricted to the classroom, but rather that the lessons and knowledge generated go out into the world with the possibility of interference and transformation. And so, in a collective and

critical way, all of us rethink this universe, living the process of a citizenry, indeed of a citizen.

Thus the texts, in the teaching and learning process of writing, require a new dimension of production and approaches, and, consequently, a new teacher/facilitator for the construction of a new classroom.

When they speak about texts and the functions of language, Kaufman and Rodriguez (1995) point to the speaker's different intentions that these communicative units contain. That is, sometimes texts inform us, at other times persuade us, or even want to seduce us. To these authors:

> The text is the carpet: it combines different language features, combines different classes of action, selects words, favors certain syntactic relations, etc. to transmit different intentions. These fabrics, these plots are the narrative, argumentation, description and conversation. (Kaufman and RODRIGUES, 1995, p. 16)

Thinking about this dimension of textual production leads us to a particular type of educator. We asked what type of teacher/educator seduces his student in this direction, this magical path with letters?

We believe that it is the educator who had the opportunity and predisposition to discover the pleasure of reading, to find, in written language, a way to express "things of his world," his feelings, thus creating other worlds, experiencing the creation of texts that serve for life, for various social contexts.

We also believe that it is the educator who sees and conceives of his students as possessing skills - like his - of looking, building awareness, of wanting to talk about the world around him. It is someone who researches, who seeks to feed himself with knowledge, who is able to see the real needs and pleasures of reading and writing. In other words, it is the educator who presents himself to his students as a model: of a reader, writer and mediator in his process of knowledge construction.

Thus to enable learning, the classroom should not and cannot be summed up as a physical space on school grounds, inside which are placed desks in "generally the same position" and a blackboard: a place where students come, sit, listen, repeat tasks, copy and exit.

In contrast, the classroom must be conceived as a space that allows for interaction between teacher and students, students and students, believing that indeed in this place and from it, a dynamic dialogue happens between people involved in the process of teaching and learning and everyone leaves changed after every class. It is a place where each person's look can take apart and see things (previously unseen and never experienced) since this is simultaneously a micro and a macro universe: a classroom.

Thus one can accept the "challenge that goes far beyond literacy in the strict sense of the word. The challenge that schools face today is to incorporate all students into the writing culture and to ensure that all of their former students become full members of the community of readers and writers" (LERNER, 2002).

6. Final Considerations

In the process of literacy, teaching practices – which adopt methods centered on de-contextualized and fragmented teaching whose goals are to decode and memorize the relationship between letters and their phonemes – collaborate with the perpetuation of the differences between disadvantaged social classes and dominant social groups and, consequently, with the school success of the latter and the failure of the former. In contrast, in a process of teaching and learning in which the students' prior knowledge is considered as a starting point for the acquisition of writing, texts are mapped in the network of textual productions that circulate socially in the students' every day lives, and what is learned – built through interactions mediated by

teachers – are contextualized in spaces that favor the forming of proficient, autonomous and critical readers.

The barriers that have interfered, throughout the educational history of Brazil, with low-income children's access to school and the number of spots available in public schools are numerous. However, in the context of school, there are starting to form real possibilities of achieving established goals regarding instruction and learning. More specifically, there is a growing possibility of the effectuation of the act of reading and writing in an environment in which classes can be designed depending on who is in them, in spaces for significant contact with scientific knowledge. Thus so, the school assumes its important socio-cultural role, open to qualitative meetings between students of various social classes and the knowledge socio-historically constructed by humanity and thus to collaborate in the construction of a civic society.

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